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**TESTIMONY OF AFRICAN CARIBBEAN AMERICAN PARENTS
OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, INC. (AFCAMP)
FOR THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
BUDGET HEARINGS
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
FEBRUARY 14, 2014**

Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony concerning the Department of Children and Families (DCF) budget. My name is Ann Smith and I am executive director of African Caribbean American Parents of Children with Disabilities, Inc. (AFCAMP). AFCAMP educates, empowers and engages parents and community to improve quality of life for children with special needs and others at risk of education inequity or system involvement. This is our mission statement and it is what leads me to urge your support for reinvestment into community-based services of cost savings achieved by DCF through reductions in congregate care capacity. Such reinvestment is critical to ensuring that DCF has sufficient resources to provide a full continuum of effective services to treat and maintain children and families in their communities where they can access natural supports and resiliency factors that contribute to better outcomes.

Adequate investment in children's mental health and child welfare services that improve access to quality therapeutic interventions, provide effective family-centered supports and encourage a holistic approach to child and family wellness is the right thing to do for Connecticut's children. While that

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alone should be enough, it also makes good economic sense from the standpoint of investing in services now that can reduce or avert more costly investment for longer-term and more intensive services when the system fails our children and families.

There is a particular item in the DCF budget that AFCAMP does not support and that is DCF's proposal to construct a second maximum-security facility for girls at a cost of \$2.6 million. Over the past year, Connecticut has been featured in several national reports praising reforms in our juvenile justice system. We gladly accepted the accolades, but we seem to be returning to the failed policies of the past. We are relying on incarceration, the costliest invention for taxpayers and the most devastating for children and families. The number of girls committed as delinquent is already small, and it is shrinking. With the addition of the new facility, Connecticut would have 26 secure beds for girls. Last year, only 23 Connecticut girls were committed as delinquent. Where is the data showing the need for a facility that will cost \$2.6 million and take away the freedom of girls? Is there a cost/benefit analysis that shows this facility will be more beneficial than increased community supports? It does not appear that the need for a second maximum-security facility has been clearly documented unless the state is planning to rely more heavily on secure confinement as a response for girls. That would be tragic.

Children are more likely to be successful after their commitment if they have strong and supportive relationships with their families. Maximum-security facilities, as we have seen with the Connecticut Juvenile Training School, do not nurture such relationships.

Instead of building more maximum-security facilities, the state should be investing in community-based programming that strengthens families and includes a more extensive array of prevention and community-based treatment. We should also be investing in reentry, currently a gap in the system of

care. If we had effective reentry services, girls currently at Journey House could transition more quickly back to their own communities with a better chance of being successful. Gridlock would be reduced and Journey House would have increased capacity to accept referrals.

DCF's contention is that many of the girls who will be housed in this unit have been trafficked. It also appears that many of these girls have been in the DCF system and do not belong in the juvenile justice system at all. The state should be providing safe and appropriate services to help these girls recover from their traumatic experiences. Is a maximum-security facility the best place to do that? Are we sure that there are no less restrictive, effective alternatives to serve these girls than locking them up? Shouldn't we have answers to these questions before the facility is built?

Thank you for your time and consideration.